



Colebrook School Building Project

Community Conversations

October 25th and November 4th, 2023

Summary Report

Contents

Colebrook School Building Project.....	1
Community Conversations.....	1
Contents.....	1
Background	1
Questions asked.....	2
Themes and Priorities Emerging from the Conversations	2
Potential Next Steps and Continued Work.....	4
Appendices.....	5
Participation and Feedback Form Responses	11
Transcriptions of Small Group Notes	13

Background

Last spring, the ballot initiative to approve a bond for an addition to our school building was defeated. The Building Committee is looking for other options, including donations, to add to the State building aid in order to ensure no tax impact. The School Board sponsored two community conversations to discuss the facility and education needs in Colebrook and gain community input. Participants perspectives and insights will help us understand how we move forward with the school renovation and expansion project. Our goal is to have an informed discussion about what opinions, perspectives, questions, and facts you want the building committee to keep in mind.

What are the most important things to consider when thinking about...

- Our aging school facility, safety, and needed updates (regardless of expansion)
- Our overcrowded school and lack of high school
- The costs and the benefits
- Current and future students’ learning needs – Pre-K through 12 and adult learners
- Our community’s ability to attract workers and families

The two conversations occurred at the Colebrook School Cafeteria on 10/25/23 and 11/4/23. Tours of the school building were provided prior to each event.



Questions Asked

- What stands out to you in the information shared? (see appendix of this report)
- What priorities should be considered by decision makers?
- How well are the needs of the students and educators met by the current facilities?
- If there is no tax impact, what remains challenging or concerning about this project for you as a community member?
- What are the pros and cons of keeping things the same?
- What features/needs do you think should be emphasized in a renovation/expansion of our school, so all students, present and future, have room to learn and access to quality facilities?
- What questions are lingering for you about this project?
- If there was one thing you wanted the building committee to know, what would it be?

Themes and Priorities Emerging from the Conversations

Three themes emerged multiple times during the small group conversations and large group report outs at the end of both meetings. Each theme is explored below, and additional context can be found in the appendices.

We need to rebuild trust and increase transparency

Participants spoke often about needing to build trust and increase transparency when big decisions such as the school building project are underway. People have varying pieces of information that have led to misunderstandings and some misinformation about where the renovation funding would come from and how the process was moving forward.

Some key points related to this theme include:

- Lack of trust – not just in local leaders, but also trust that The Balsams will eventually happen, trust that there would not be tax impacts, and trust that this will not end up being a waste of resources if the population of young people declines.
- More transparency is requested concerning the building project.
- One of the contradictions is that the school board and building committee have worked hard to communicate the issues AND there continue to be details that need clarifying. The details are complicated and that can add to the feeling that local leaders are not being transparent.
- It helps to assume people want the best for their kids and grandkids.
- Ending the discussion by a community member at the annual school meeting in March caught a lot of people off guard – the use of “calling the question” also prompted lack of trust.
- Lots of changes to the funding details and last-minute changes that happen in complex projects also contribute to lack of trust.



Some of the information seems contradictory – but it is not

Information is not clear enough – Doing nothing is not an option

Participants furthered their discussion about trust and transparency by talking about the need for clarity. Building renovations and funding are complex and have many decision-making points and considerations. What may be clear to some, is not clear to others. For instance, it is not clear to many people in the community that money would have to be spent anyway to comply with several health and safety related issues (ex. lead issues, need new boiler, etc.).

There were lots of questions about why some choices were made or cannot still be made, and why some options are not available anymore. This confusion has led to misinformation, as concerned residents of many different ages grapple with this building project. Neighboring states have different types of aid, which is also hard to follow. For example, Vermont has more per student adequacy aid but no building aid. It is also challenging to understand, as participants talked about:

- We would pay more for a less extensive renovation later; it is better to approve of this building addition which comes with more aid now.
- The cost will be higher if we don't do this now.
- Current building renovations that are needed would be included in cost of the bigger project.
- The town will have to bear the entire cost, and the grant funding will go away, if we only do the small, safety and compliance renovation.
- Taxpayers are concerned about taxes. What needs to be said more is that any other option that anyone else has come up with is going to cost more. This is how to accomplish this with the least amount of money.

These are examples of realities that are not fully understood by the public overall. People were also not aware that the roof needs to be more structurally sound to install cost-saving solar panels.

The current building is not working for anyone, especially students

Students who participated along with adults noted the various impacts on students' day-to-day life at school (ex. space, access to proper equipment, travel to Career and Technical programs, etc.). The current building accommodations are not working for anyone (educators, students, special education, Career and Technical Education). The addition and renovations would include benefits that would impact everyone learning in the school system, including adult learners.

Students overall talked about:

- Wanting better for future generations
- Feeling uncared for in the current building situation
- Too reliant on other schools and spaces for offsite programs, they could easily be taken away
- Transportation is expensive and takes students away from town.
- Safety concerns - lead in water, weak windows, heating, cooling, students falling on the stairs.



- Not proper separation between grade levels. High school students shouldn't be mixed with elementary school students.
- There are job opportunities here. We need to educate students for these jobs. Young people don't want to come back. It's a very negative place.

The groups with students participating during the two community conversations also wondered:

- Is it still true that they are losing the lease to the tech building after one more year? More room is needed considering the number of students that use it.
- We don't have a high school. 120 students were brought into this school and are being squeezed into spaces not designed for them. How is this legal?
- When will the building begin, when will it end?
- How do we bring the community together on this?
- How are they going to raise the funds by February?
- What happens if they don't raise the funds in time?
- Why are people so negative and close minded? Don't people want their children or future children to have the opportunity they need?

Potential Next Steps and Continued Work

In addition to increasing transparency and working to clarify details and information, participants suggested there be one more opportunity for people to talk to each other at another, non-school location. There was also interest in the opportunity for more community members to tour the facilities. Other opportunities to clarify information and learn more before a next vote include taking a tour or attending a building committee meeting.

Online Resources

Building Committee agendas and minutes from 2021 through the present that are posted on the School District website under committee agendas and minutes here;
<https://schooladminunit7.schoolinsites.com/colebrookschoolboard>

Building Project Information on the School District Website:
https://csd.sau7.org/proposed_colebrook_academy_and_cte_center

School District Building Project Facebook Page:
<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61551639193686>